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Interview

Boris Johnson, Brexit, UK Crisis... and the Left? - Socialism After the United Kingdom

Saturday 10 August 2019, by [DAVIDSON Neil](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2019).

Boris Johnson's drive toward a no-deal Brexit is hastening calls for the breakup of the United Kingdom. The crisis of the British state creates opportunities for the Left's socialist message – but only if it can navigate the messy politics of national identity.

Boris Johnson recently won the vote among the Tory membership to succeed Theresa May and is now prime minister of Britain. He won based on a promise to take Britain out of the European Union by October 31, with a new Brexit deal or without one.

Here, *Jacobin* contributor Ashley Smith speaks to Neil Davidson about Johnson, Brexit, and the prospects and impact of a possible general election in Britain. Davidson is a member of Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century (rs21) and RISE — Scotland's Left Alliance, and is the author of numerous books, including *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* and *We Cannot Escape History: States and Revolutions*.

Ashley Smith (AS)

After trouncing his various opponents on the Tory right, Boris Johnson has become prime minister of Britain. Who is Johnson and what does he stand for?

Neil Davidson (ND)-

Boris Johnson is a public school boy, who went to Eton and then Oxford, where he was a member of the Bullingdon Club with other Tory lowlifes like David Cameron. He made his name at the *Daily Telegraph*, or "*Torygraph*," as we usually call it, and then edited leading right-wing magazine the *Spectator*.

Based for a time in Brussels, he made a name for himself as a right-wing Eurosceptic penning "news stories" replete with lies about the European Union. The right-wing press published this rubbish because it bashed the EU, regardless of its dubious journalistic quality.

After his career as a "journalist," he became a television personality on quiz shows and then found a safe Conservative Party seat in Parliament. He used that to launch his successful campaign for the mayoralty of London, which projected him as a national politician. Since that office was established in 2000, left-winger Ken Livingstone won it twice and held it for eight years.

Johnson, ever the political chameleon, defeated Livingstone in 2008 by posing as a social neoliberal, combining some progressive rhetoric with traditional Tory economic policies. This deceptive combination was essential to get elected in London. He didn't do much in his two terms as mayor; he did enact some reforms, which had in reality been proposed by Livingstone, like free bicycles, but he also wasted loads of money on ridiculous vanity projects.

Soon he was back in Parliament in another safe Tory seat. After a period of vacillation between the “Leave” and “Remain” viewpoints on Britain’s membership in the European Union, he opportunistically calculated that Leave would be best for his political career and turned himself into an ardent Brexiteer. He rivaled far-right politician the Brexit Party’s Nigel Farage in demagoguery and lying about the EU.

Theresa May resigned as Tory leader and prime minister after she failed to win a majority in the 2017 general election or to get her Brexit deal passed by Parliament. Johnson jumped at the chance to replace her, engaging in a nostalgic campaign of British nationalism, invoking all sorts of myths about the country’s imperialist past, and promised that as leader of Great Britain he could force the EU to agree to a new deal and that, if they didn’t, he would lead the country out with a no-deal Brexit on or before the October 31 Halloween deadline.

AS

What has Johnson begun to do now that he’s in power?

ND

He’s conducted something resembling Harold MacMillan’s famous “night of the long knives” by kicking out all of Theresa May’s cabinet appointees who had not already resigned their posts. His new cabinet is stuffed full of hard Brexiteers with various combinations of neoliberal economics and reactionary political positions.

Dominic Cummings, who, as head of Vote Leave, was responsible for some of the biggest lies in the original campaign for Brexit, is Johnson’s chief adviser. Home secretary Priti Patel supports bringing back the death penalty. Chancellor Sajid Javid is a hard-core neoliberal in economics and supported Theresa May’s anti-migrant call for “illegals” to “go home.”

Johnson appointed these people for cynical reasons. He wants them close so he can prevent them from attacking him, and also to share the blame if his government ends in disaster. That is not out of the question by any means. Johnson faces the same problem that Theresa May did; the EU will not give an inch on the terms of Brexit and certainly will not cut Johnson any new deal.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, has already said that there is no way they are going to reopen negotiations. He’s made it clear that they think they’ve already struck a deal, and that Johnson must either push it through Parliament or Britain will go out with a no-deal Brexit. The twenty-seven member states will no doubt back Juncker’s hard line.

So, Johnson will face the same impasse that May did. The EU is intransigent, and the Tories do not have a majority to pass the current deal. One possible solution for him is to call a general election before October in the hopes of getting a majority for his position. So, realistically, it’s either crash out without a deal, or a new election.

Beyond the never-ending Brexit crisis, Johnson is not pursuing a simple right-wing agenda. He has proposed some reforms like infrastructure spending designed to curry favor with working-class voters in the north of England. But the truth is that Johnson’s base is not the working-class north, south, east, or west, but the middle classes and, in particular, those sections mainly in the south of England where the Leave vote was strongest.

Essentially, Johnson’s election has not solved anything, and his rise to power is a symptom of the degeneration of the British political class. Beyond self-promotion, he has absolutely no talent whatsoever, and he’s never had a real job in his life. Now this buffoon is at the head of the British state. He’s utterly unprepared and unfit to engage in strategic thinking, as are the people around

him.

At least as mayor, he was surrounded by officials who did the work he was incapable of doing. Whole sections of the actual ruling class are, quite understandably, at their wits' end about his ascent to leadership. The *Financial Times*, for instance, has had several articles where they express despair about Johnson and the other people running the country.

Some of them would actually prefer Corbyn because they think they know how to deal with the Labour Party and have done so many times. That they even entertain this idea shows how frustrated they are with the complete mess the Tory Party is in.

AS

Many in the United States have likened Johnson to Trump. Are they comparable figures? Do they share a far-right program?

ND

It would be an exaggeration to say that Johnson has a program besides his own self-advancement. He's not as right wing or programmatic as Trump.

Of course, he says stupid and racist things, but he's not a hard-core racist. Just look at his cabinet; he appointed several black, Asian, and minority ethnic people and women, all of whom are, of course, profoundly conservative. Johnson is just an opportunistic power-seeking careerist who will say and do anything to cultivate an audience in politics or the media.

Where he does resemble Trump is how they used their status television personalities, as many twenty-first-century politicians do, to build a political career. But Trump, unlike Johnson, actually ran a company; he was a real-estate tycoon. And Trump, despite all his erratic behavior, does have a racist and xenophobic program, which he uses to rouse his petty-bourgeois base and drive through his "America First" nationalist agenda.

Not only does Johnson lack a consistent program, he also cannot appeal to the "ordinary" middle class as effectively as Trump. He's too much an obvious product of the English ruling class, the very model of the bumbling public school boy. This persona will perhaps appeal to a section of the middle class in the south of England, but it will be the kiss of death in Scotland and Wales.

AS

How have Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party reacted to Johnson's victory? How are they positioning themselves over Brexit now? What about the other smaller parties?

ND

Corbyn has rightly attacked Johnson for his right-wing positions, but Brexit continues to pose real problems for him and the Labour Party. There are divisions at the top of the party and its base between those supporting Leave and Remain. While Corbyn is personally for Leave, he has not tried to make that argument, but has balanced between the two positions.

As a result, Nigel Farage, his Brexit Party, and Johnson's Tories have set the terms of opposition to the EU. Within the Labour Party, its neoliberal wing has seized the opportunity to push for Remain and paint anyone opposed to the EU as a right winger.

Corbyn's fudging on Brexit has pleased no one and has opened up space for his right-wing opponents in Labour to attack him. They've denounced him for his hesitancy to oppose Brexit and have invented completely false charges that, because he supports Palestinian rights, he and the Labour left are antisemitic.

Despite these attacks, Corbyn's leadership of the party is currently invulnerable. He consolidated it through the party's relative — and unexpected — success in the last general election. That said, no one is any longer chanting "Oh Jeremy Corbyn" at the Glastonbury Festival now. That's partly because some of those people are Remainers, but it's also because he's not arguing for anything.

So, Corbyn's balancing act has opened the door in the party for the neoliberals to shift the party in favor of Remain. Labour now seems prepared to call for a new referendum and, in the event of that, support a vote for remaining in the EU.

Outside the Labour Party, the Remain camp is quite strong. One of the bourgeois parties, the Liberal Democrats, are for Remain. The Green Party, which has a white-collar petty-bourgeois base, is also for Remain. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which is hegemonic in Scotland and is also the third largest party in the British Parliament, is also for Remain.

AS

If the EU remains unwilling to negotiate, will this produce a no-deal Brexit? Could the Tories opt for a new election? What will be the possible results of that?

ND

We are in an unpredictable situation. But two options seem the most likely. One is that Johnson will fail to strike a new deal and Britain will crash out on or before the 31st of October. The other is that Johnson calls a general election.

The Tories will try to make an election all about Brexit. They will argue that the EU is out to get everyone and that they're defending the democratic vote from the last referendum against Labour and other Remainers. One consequence of this position will be that the Tories reabsorb all those voters that defected to Nigel Farage and his far-right Brexit Party.

If the Tories win and change the balance of power in the House of Commons in favor of Brexit, Johnson would try to get the EU to negotiate a new deal, and then if he secured one, push it through Parliament. But Johnson would run into the same opposition from the EU to any new negotiations and hit a dead end and likely carry out a no-deal Brexit.

Corbyn and Labour will attempt to make the election about broader issues than just Brexit. But they will be forced to address Brexit. They will probably argue for another referendum, and support Remain.

The SNP will also focus on Brexit as well and support Remain. They wrongly believe that Scottish independence and staying in the EU must be linked. We in the Radical Independence Campaign have argued and will argue that — whatever your attitude to the EU — the two issues have to be kept separate.

In other words, if Scotland achieves independence, that should be followed by a further referendum. My own view is that the EU's neoliberalism would compromise the ability of an independent Scotland to pass social reforms, let alone build a socialist Scotland.

I think it's possible that Corbyn and Labour could win a general election and form a government with the support of the SNP and the Greens. That could produce another referendum on EU membership, whose outcome is not predictable, but if it ended in Leave again, the crisis would re-erupt.

But even a Labour victory would not solve the crisis of the British state. Why? Because the SNP would require as part of an agreement to form a coalition government (or to even provide

“confidence-and-supply” support) that a second referendum on Scottish independence be held. So, in the event of a possible yes pro-independence vote in Scotland, which would likely trigger similar moves in Wales and for the reunification of Ireland, we would be headed for territorial breakup of the British state.

AS

What will be the impact of all of this on the EU itself?

ND

Sadly, the Brexit crisis has strengthened the EU against any dissenters. We should remember that the EU is a neoliberal, undemocratic, and anti-migrant institution entirely set up for the benefit of the European capitalist classes, especially those in its dominant countries like Germany and France. That’s why so many countries like Greece, which had borne the brunt of EU austerity policies, had considered breaking with it.

But the Brexit crisis has scared them away from doing that. Governments and parties in the member states look at the mess Britain finds itself in and don’t want to end up in that position. They may lobby for reforms, but no one is going to imitate Britain now. Even some of the right-wing parties that are hostile to the EU have dropped that demand. Even they are no longer talking about leaving.

AS

What will this mean for Britain’s ruling class, its parties, and its state?

ND

The bourgeoisie is in a profound and organic crisis. It lacks a coherent political representative that can implement its general interests. The Tory Party is now under the control of the buffoon Johnson. He is backed and funded by a narrow faction of capitalists consisting mainly of hedge-fund financiers, not a broad cross section of the capitalist class, and the former want his government to serve their narrow interests.

This is a dangerous situation for the ruling class; since Adam Smith, their most astute intellectuals have always argued that it was a mistake to let one small group of capitalists dominate, because they will do things against the interests of the whole class. And Johnson and his hedge-fund sponsors are already undercutting the interests of manufacturing and finance capital, who support the EU to gain access to cheap migrant labor and European financial institutions.

But the ruling class does not have an alternative party to the Tories at this point. The Lib Dems would like to be a representative party of capital, but they have yet to prove themselves capable of that. This is actually a very serious crisis for the ruling class. This is not a one-off episode, but the end of the long process of a crisis of the political representation of ruling-class interests in Britain.

In reality, there is not a single party that’s strong across the whole of the UK the way the Whigs and Tories, then Tories and Labor used to be. The Tories’ base has shrunk to a base mainly in the south of England. Labour has lost Scotland to the SNP. And minor parties like the Lib Dems and Greens have eaten away at the edges of these parties.

One positive impact of this whole crisis is that it’s finally put paid to any idea that Britain is an important world power. The ruling class has proved itself unable to run its own country, let alone maintain its status as an imperialist power. A good example of its decline was its incapacity to do anything when Iran seized a British flagged ship in the Persian Gulf.

So, Brexit has thrown the British ruling class, its parties, its state, and really its existence as a

nation-state into crisis. But this won't necessarily play out in the favor of the working class and oppressed groups, unless the Left is prepared to take advantage of the crisis as an opportunity to put forward an alternative socialist agenda.

AS

So that raises the question of what the Left should do amidst the seemingly unending Brexit crisis.

ND

To be honest we're in a very difficult situation. Unlike in the Scottish independence referendum, the radical left failed to hegemonize the argument for Leave. Consequently, the center left immediately associate you with Farage and the right. It becomes even impossible to talk about the EU and its actual nature because all opposition to it is wrongly identified with that of the populist right.

I don't think a general election is a solution of any of our problems in a broader sense, but it might make it possible to break out of the sense that Brexit is the only issue of our time. Even crashing out would obviously cause huge problems, but at least then Brexit is over, and we can start saying, "You put us into this mess, these are the demands — above all, protection of jobs — we want met as trade unionists and working-class people."

Then we can focus attention on the pressing issues of our time, which have been subordinated to Brexit. The climate struggle is a central one and a sign of hope for the future. There have been big actions happening, and then there will be the climate strike on September 20.

The Left should be fully behind this. It is a strike, after all! I think one of the things that is fascinating is that social movements like climate justice and the women's movement have resurrected the idea of striking. Unions should join the action on September 20, even if just for a lunch break, and in the process recover for themselves the idea of striking.

There are also hopeful signs of a recovery of industrial action, but we're coming up from a low level of strikes. Just last year, they had dropped to the lowest level in a hundred years. But conditions have grown so bad that now a lot of young workers are willing to strike, leading to an uptick in actions so far this year with more coming, including a possible strike of university lecturers in the fall.

There is also anti-war activism against saber-rattling against Iran. I don't think there will be war with Iran, but we have to remain vigilant. And, of course, we have to protest Johnson and the Tories. This has already started — there were several demos across the UK last week, including three in London involving around ten thousand mostly young people.

In all of this, simply raising slogans like "Bring down the Tories," without specifying how, is less than helpful. At this point, only a general election seems to be capable of doing that, especially if Labour manages to present a broader program. But, in reality, until there's some kind of resolution to Brexit, we are stuck in a log jam.

P.S.

• Jacobin, 08.09.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/neil-davidson-boris-johnson-brexit-tory-leave-remain-prime-mi>

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Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including Truthout, The International Socialist Review, Socialist Worker, ZNet, Jacobin, New Politics, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled Socialism and Anti-Imperialism.